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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SKOPJE 000273

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/18/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MK](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#)  
SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: IMPLEMENTING NEW RELIGIOUS FREEDOM LAW  
WHILE BLURRING CHURCH-STATE SEPARATION

REF: A. SKOPJE 120  
[1](#)B. 2007 SKOPJE 290

Classified by: POLOFF BOSWORTH FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (SBU) With implementation of an acclaimed new Law on Religious Groups due to begin on May 1, internal opposition is growing against GOM-backed programs and trends perceived as running counter to a clear separation of church and state. Specifically, some government agencies, political parties, and citizens' groups oppose plans for a state-funded church in the main city square of Skopje and a mosque in Tetovo (ref A). Additionally, plans to include religious education in public schools beginning this fall are meeting with opposition from parents, students, and some religious leaders, in addition to being challenged in the Constitutional Court. The largely low-key opposition may take a more robust profile as the government takes steps to implement these projects. At the same time, a few challenging test cases for registration of religious communities under the liberal new Law on Religious Communities may shed some light on whether the GOM is leaning towards enhancing religious freedoms under the new law, or further blurring the line between church and state. End summary.

State-Funded Churches/Mosques Face Government Critics  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) The behind-closed-doors January 22 decision of the GOM to fund the construction of an Orthodox church in the main city square of Skopje and to reconstruct a mosque in Tetovo (ref A) is facing criticism from a variety of sources, including government officials. Initially opposed by civic and NGO leaders as well as members of opposition political parties, the criticism now is coming from closer to home, and includes both the head of the Ministry of Culture's Directorate of Cultural Preservation and the Director of the Government's Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups.

[1](#)3. (C) The Director of the State Commission for Cultural Preservation, Metin Izeti, told us that while he has dedicated his career to securing funding for the preservation

of religious sites, he strongly opposes the notion of "a church for me, and a mosque for you" decided behind closed doors. He believes that state funding should focus on preservation of existing cultural/religious sites, and not on the politically-motivated creation of new ones.

14. (C) State Commission on Relations with Religious Groups and Communities Director Zvonko Mucunski also has distanced himself from the GOM decision, noting that he is unsure where funding will come from for the projects. He adds that the government decision is "unrelated to this Commission." Despite his lack of support for the plan, he was tasked by the GOM with quieting the plan's most vocal detractor, the ethnic-Albanian NGO "Wake Up". Wake Up protested the plan on the basis that the location proposed for the church is the location of Mother Teresa's childhood home, and called for a memorial home to be built on the site instead (ref A). Mucunski recently told us that the "issue with the NGO has been resolved," and that Wake Up recently had been licensed to build the memorial home next to the nearby Army Hall, off the main central square of Skopje, leaving the central square site open for the GOM-planned church construction.

Religion in Public Schools: Bucking the Constitution to Give Youth What they Don't Want  
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15. (SBU) Construction of churches and mosques is not the only area in which the appropriateness of government funding and action is being questioned. Permitted by April 2007 amendments to the Law on Education, and confirmed in the new Law on Religious Communities, religious education in public

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schools is getting a second chance at life, after failing to reach the classrooms in 1998 because of a Constitutional Court challenge. The new plan for religious instruction in public schools (which includes a choice among a single-faith course, a course on the history of religions, or a foreign language course) is also facing a challenge in the Constitutional Court.

16. (C) The opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) initiated the Constitutional Court challenge, on the grounds that religious instruction in public schools violates the constitutional requirement for the separation of church and state. The case against religious education in the public schools has found some supporters within the Government, as well as among many students and parents, and even some religious leaders. The Ministry of Education, also less-than-enthusiastic about the potential segregationist nature of single-religion courses, recently proposed adding the foreign language option alongside the religious course offerings.

17. (SBU) Youth leaders also shared their concerns about the potentially segregationist nature of the single-faith courses. At a recent discussion of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, a mixed group of ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian high school and university student leaders expressed strong opposition to adding another layer of academic separation, beyond the existing linguistic barrier, between ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian students. While most supported courses such as "comparative religions" or "history of religions", the students were uniformly against any single-faith courses, even elective ones, being included in the public school curriculum. One student noted that her parents were working at the local level to prevent single-faith courses in the public schools in her town.

18. (SBU) Despite such opposition, development of curricula for the courses is underway. While Orthodox, Islamic, Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant community leaders have told us that they were asked by the Ministry of Education to work

together in developing a curriculum for the proposed history of religions course, none has any insight into the status of that project. Each indicated he has worked only on the curriculum for the single-faith course. Minister of Education Sulejman Rushiti has indicated that the Ministry will review the materials submitted by the religious communities for the single-faith courses, and has suggested that schools here might use something "off-the-shelf" from abroad for the history of religions course.

¶9. (SBU) A Macedonian Orthodox Church leader who was involved in developing curricula during the 1998 effort to bring religious education to the public schools does not believe there is sufficient time to develop an effective and well-planned program, either at the single-faith or the multi-faith level. Metropolitan Metodi Zlatanov, in a conversation with POLOFF, recently offered, "it's not important to start this as soon as possible, it's important to get it right."

¶10. (C) Court challenges and opposition aside, both the State Commission on Relations with Religious Communities and Groups and the Ministry of Education believe that the Constitutional Court will clear the way for the courses to start this fall. The State Commission indicated it expects the case to be finished by the end of May, and the Ministry of Education is convinced that the program will go forward for the 2008-2009 school year. LDP's Andrej Zernovski said that the Prime Minister is personally interested in this case, and may be applying pressure on the Constitutional Court for a quick resolution.

#### Liberal Religious Freedom Law?

¶11. (C) As debate continues on these contentious areas of interplay between church and state, neither government nor religious leaders are focusing much attention on implementation of the new Law on Religious Communities.

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Under the new law, which generally meets international standards and is arguably the most liberal in the region, the process for registering religious communities and groups will be passed from the State Commission on Relations with Religious Communities and Groups to the Skopje Basic Court (ref B). But just weeks ahead of implementation of the new law, neither the State Commission nor the Basic Court has further information on implementation plans. Last month, the State Commission's Director Mucunski said it was likely "too early" to ask the Ministry of Justice what steps it was taking to prepare the Skopje Basic Court to assume its new adjudication duties following the September 2007 passage of the law. Religious leaders of those communities that will be authorized to register for the first time under the new law have not been informed what the registration process will entail. Similarly, the State Commission does not know what specific challenges communities that faced registration obstacles in the past, such as the Bektashi and "Ohrid Archbishopric" (ref B), might encounter under the new law.

#### COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) There appears to be a broad base of opposition here, inside and outside the Government, to blurring the line between church and state, especially given the potential negative impacts on inter-ethnic relations of the government's dabbling in religion. However, despite the Constitutional Court challenge to religious education in public schools and NGO protests against a government-funded church on the main Skopje city square, the public outcry against the projects has been muted. Similarly, few seem surprised or concerned about the potential lack of readiness to implement the new Law on Religious Communities on May 1. The largely quiet opposition to what may be a trend away from

a clear separation of church and state may be credited, at least in part, to the media and citizens' focus on other key issues (NATO membership, the name dispute, early elections).

Nevertheless, government leaders expect a rapid resolution of the Constitutional Court challenge to religious education in the public schools. As NGO opposition to the government plan to build a church in Skopje's main city square is quieted, all signs are pointing toward forward momentum on these projects. With the reality of implementation looming, we can expect the volume of opposition to increase. At the same time, challenging test cases of registrations of previously controversial religious groups under the new Law on Religious Communities will help clarify which way the GOM is leaning at this crossroads between enhancing religious freedom and blurring the lines separating church and state. End comment.

MILOVANOVIC